

United States Senate

Committee on Commerce, Science,
And Transportation
Washington, DC 20510-6125

Testimony for January 16, 2001 hearing on the decline of West Coast groundfish

STATEMENT OF BOB EATON, PACIFIC MARINE CONSERVATION COUNCIL

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to testify on West Coast groundfish issues. My name is Bob Eaton. I am the Executive Director of Pacific Marine Conservation Council, or PMCC. PMCC is a nonprofit, public benefit organization working with commercial and recreational fishermen, scientists and conservationists to conserve and sustain West Coast groundfish and the coastal communities that depend upon them. PMCC's mission is dual and focuses on maintaining the health of the resource as well as the economies of coastal communities. It is this mission, combined with concerns for the state of the groundfish resource, the maintenance of fleet diversity, and the sustainability of the groundfish fishery, that is the catalyst for this testimony.

BACKGROUND

The West Coast groundfish fishery is in a crisis. One year ago, the Secretary of Commerce issued a disaster declaration for this fishery. The current situation is incrementally worse. At least five species of groundfish have declined to levels where rebuilding plans are required; this month, two more species, dark-blotched and widow rockfish, are expected to be designated as over-fished.

Exacerbating the process of rebuilding these weak stocks is the fact that they are often found where harvest of healthy stocks occurs, and the over-fished species are caught as bycatch. However, we lack reliable data regarding total mortality of these fish, because we currently have no mechanism to measure it. Fishery managers are compelled to impose trip limits and other restrictions on groundfish landings, lacking the necessary total mortality information.

Coastal communities are reeling under the economic hardship resultant from groundfish stock declines and management responses. The disaster declaration is, unfortunately, deserved. Fisherman, fishing families and local businesses are all suffering. Some areas have already lost all or part of the infrastructure that supports the fishing industry. PMCC joins these communities in aspiring to the vision of sustainable fisheries.

The Pacific Fishery Management Council is moving to implement their precedent setting five-year strategic plan for groundfish, titled "Transition to Sustainability." This thoughtfully-prepared transition envisions substantial capacity reduction, use of marine reserves as a management tool,

exploring incentives to encourage less destructive and more selective gear types, and immediately implementing an observer program.

THE OBSERVER PROGRAM

The cornerstone of possible recovery for the groundfish fishery is a mandatory at-sea observer program. Fishermen and scientists often disagree over the health of a particular species, but neither has the complete data to substantiate their case. Without an observer program, managers must continue to use approximations which, if overly conservative, result in unnecessary limitations on fishing efforts. Conversely, if fish populations are over-estimated, this inadequate data could result in allowing overexploitation - to the long-term detriment of the resource and our fishing communities.

Current estimates of bycatch rates in West Coast groundfish fisheries are largely based on a study done in the mid-1980s. Making critical decisions based on outdated information is a disservice to the resource and the fishermen. From 1995-98 a very limited observer program operated with voluntary cooperation from relatively few trawl vessel operators. However, the Enhanced Data Collection Project did not provide for random placement of observers. This fact and the voluntary nature of the program essentially rendered the results to be less statistically robust and applicable than a mandatory program would be.

We've learned from extensive data collecting efforts in other fishery-dependent regions that an effective observer program must include these basic elements:

- The observer program and placement of observers must be mandatory.
- Coverage must be coast-wide.
- Observation of all gear types must be included, although coverage need not be 100% in order to be statistically valid.
- Observers must be well-trained technicians with no conflict-of-interest.
- Data must be consistently collected over a period of years and used in a timely manner.

Congress deserves congratulations for taking the affirmative step last month of appropriating \$2.275 million to begin a West Coast observer program. These funds will help develop the structure and finance a rudimentary first year program. PMCC asks that another \$2.5 million be provided to the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) through 2001 Supplemental Appropriations - earmarked for the West Coast observer program. This is the requisite beginning to getting the data needed for sound management. In addition we ask that \$1 million each be provided to the states of Oregon, Washington and California to allow for observers

and data gathering in near-shore and state-managed fisheries, recognizing that fish don't distinguish between state and federal waters.

For fiscal year 2002, we ask that Congress appropriate \$5 million for continuing the federally managed observer program. This is the right step to take to help move towards sustainable fisheries.

The need to secure and protect adequate funding for West Coast observers is so vital to the effort to achieve sustainable fisheries that the \$2.5 million 2001 Supplemental (plus \$3 million for the states) and the \$5 million for fiscal year 2002 should be stand-alone lines in the funding requests.

The observer program is a high priority for the Pacific Council. At the November, 2000, Council meeting a PFMC Groundfish Management Team Report began: "The GMT continues to remind the Council that lacking a comprehensive observer program, or a verified full retention program, our estimates of total fishing mortality remain highly uncertain. Absent a tool to measure changes in fish mortality that result from management changes, the GMT has no recourse other than to review trawl logbooks (which contain no discard information) and then make "guesstimates" as to what extent measures such as gear modification or changes in fishing behavior have altered observed logbook bycatch rates. Moreover, for the nontrawl sector, the GMT has no logbook program or other information to gauge the bycatch consequences of the Council's management measures. The GMT strongly supports the rapid development of an observer program that will provide information on total mortality in the groundfish fisheries."

OTHER IMPORTANT ISSUES

While the number one priority that I emphasize in this testimony is the need to adequately fund an observer program, I want to be clear that Pacific Marine Conservation Council fully supports funding for community relief. Many individuals within the fishing communities urgently need support and retraining as soon as possible. PMCC urges Congress to work with the states to provide adequate funds.

Other research activities beyond observer data collection are needed to move this fishery to recovery. Basic information is not yet available for most of the 83 federally managed groundfish species on the West Coast. We urge Congress to appropriate funds for NMFS to use to fund groundfish research through both the Southwest and Northwest Fisheries Science Centers, to conduct additional at-sea surveys and expand cooperative research efforts with the fishing industry. In fact, these cooperative projects are an excellent way to involve fishermen in data gathering while simultaneously providing some economic relief.

PMCC realizes the urgent need to support the Pacific Fishery Management Council, and encourages Congress to supplement the Council's budget with \$500,000 for staff and resources to help implement their strategic plan.

Finally, in the coming session, the Commerce Committee may have the opportunity to consider reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. PMCC encourages the committee to include language authorizing the Pacific Fishery Management Council to institute fee systems, should they choose, to enable industry participation for support of observer programs.

I look forward to assisting you and your staff as changes are made to sustain our fisheries. I am prepared to offer any information you may need and I welcome your questions. Thank you once again for this opportunity to share my thoughts and the views of my organization.

Respectfully submitted,

Bob Eaton
Executive Director
Pacific Marine Conservation Council